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Periodicals

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Title: Letters from a Travelling Bachelor

Creator: Walt Whitman

Date: October 28, 1849

Publication information: *New York Sunday Dispatch* 28 October 1849: [1].

Source: Original issue held at the Library of Congress. Our transcription is based on a digital image of an original issue.

Whitman Archive ID: per.00294

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Letters from a Travelling Bachelor.

Number III.

SOME POETICAL COMPARISONS BETWEEN COUNTRY AND CITY.—THE OLD COUPLE ON SHELTER ISLAND.—A BIT OF ARGUMENT—OR AN ATTEMPT ANY HOW

SOUTHOLD, L.I., October 24.

Quiet, homely and passionless, is the life of these East Long Islanders, compared with existence in a great city like New York. Now that old Dutch Dr. Zimmermann, who wrote so profoundly and acted so foolishly, commends "solitude" as the greatest developer and establisher of virtuous conduct, and intellectual and scientific improvement.¹ Also, it is a common way among writers to speak in the same strain—to make much of "the soothing pleasures of retirement," and the "calm delights of obscurity." We hear these gentlemen talk about life in the country as surely productive of a fine unsophisticated character in man or woman.²

I know from the frequent bent of my own feelings, that yearning for the freshness and quiet of the country—that love of freedom from the ligatures and ceremonies of a life in town. But to be born and "brought up" in an out of the way country place, and so continue there through all the stages of middle life—and eat and drink there only, and "dress up" of a Sunday and go to church there—and at last die and be buried there—is that an enviable lot in life? No, it is not. The burying part may be well enough, but the living is much such living as a tree in the farmer's door-yard.

Undoubtedly as a general thing we United Statesers have enough of the restless in us, never to settle anywhere, longer than a few seasons. But Long Island is an exception. The people are tenacious of the place, and the places, from the brown sand of Napeague Beach, far east, to the white sand of Coney Island Point, far west. Here about the eastern parts, in particular, I find whole villages, or rather scattered hamlets, whose residents were born, and will live and die here, many of them having been only once or twice away from home over night, and very many who never visit the city of New York, during their whole lives! A very large majority never entered a theatre or read a play, or saw a piano or any thing worthy to be called sculpture or painting. Only a fraction of them take newspapers—and the books I frequently find to be nothing later than the "Children of the Abbey," "Rinaldo Rinaldini," "Alonzo and Melissa," or those interesting horrors of Calvinism by Masters Fox and Baxter.³ I am aware that these people might be very intelligent, and very manly and womanly, without ever having seen a play or a piano—and therefore I only mention that as a specimen of their primitiveness. But the vegetating forever in one little spot of this wide and beautiful world—the absence of books—the getting set in the narrow notions of the locality where they live—serve to dwarf and distort much of the goodly elements of their own nature; and increase the same rude effects to the third and fourth generation.

Yes, Messrs. of the city: I have found no precept more strongly taught, by my rambles among this often hospitable and quite invariably honest and sturdy race, than that of, *Let everyone mix for at least some part of his earlier life with the bustling world of the great towns*. Such towns have, for many an age, borne the accusations of moralists, and been warned against by timid fathers and affectionate mothers. Yet were we a coarse and unhewn structure of humanity without them. Living in the country, in an insulated way, never wears off the husk upon one's manners, never sharpens conversational powers, rarely develops the intellect or the morals to the perfection they are capable of—and generally leaves a man in that condition of unbakedness, appropriately called "raw." Advantages there are, truly; but they are preserved on the same principle as the father's who, fearing his son *may* be drowned, lets him never go in the water to learn to swim.

Isolated country life, I perceive, encourages avarice and a singular sort of egotism. Penuriousness is almost universal among the farmers here, and their families; and "living by one's self" is carried to a remarkable extreme.

The other afternoon, tired and sweaty, after a long scramble over the hills and among the woods of Shelter Island, (a fertile "collection of land surrounded by water," in extent some ten miles by three,) I came down to the shore, opposite Greenport, and found myself just too late for the little ferry boat, which crosses only at long intervals. Nigh the shore ran up a beautiful creek, the water whereof was as clear as plate glass; and the mouth of this creek and the shore helped form a fine knoll whose sides were adorned with thrifty oaks and so forth, altogether a very goodly and wholesome spot. Through a gate, some five or six rods, was a large two-story double house, and the barns and outbuilding gave token to the fatness of the land. The whole air of the spot was so inviting, that I dispatched a ragged little urchin who came down to view me, back again to the house, asking if I could get a bowl of bread and milk. They had no bread, was the answer sent me, but I could have some milk and hominy. I presently found myself at the table of this well-stored dwelling, spooning up some skimmed milk and coarse burnt hominy. An old woman, the mistress of the place, bustled about, and regaled my repast with many words: her husband had gone over to Greenport after "things": she had no servants, and never wanted any: she had had nine children, all of whom were living, but none lived home: they, that is her husband and herself, had settled there thirty-eight years ago. Wasn't she sometimes lonesome? No, she never wanted company—her husband and she found they "got along" best as they were. I noticed large numbers of cows in the neighboring fields: were they hers? Yes: the cheese and butter were sent to the market. Those thrifty orchards? Yes, they produced well; the apples were sold. Divers fatting hogs, in the pens; they also were designed for market. Those flocks of poultry, and the daily products of eggs. O, they were not for "poor folks" to consume—they, too, increased the weight of the money bags.

Shortly the farmer himself came home. He had been across the bay, to "the store," for various purchases. I was amazed to notice that they were just such articles as a workingman's family in New York might get, butter, bread, candles, lard, salt fish, and so on—all by the small quantity! And I discovered, by-and-by, that this man had a good farm of nearly three hundred acres, and money out at interest, and two or three other farms for sale! His farms he put out on shares: all his

part of the product was sold over to the stores, and he purchased, by the peck and pound, just enough to live on, from season to season.

Notwithstanding all the old woman's apologies, and protestations, I saw plainly enough that they always lived in this half starving manner. I really could not eat the thin milk and coarse burnt corn; but, as I rose, I put down a shilling on the table. The fierce clutching look of the woman's eyes, as she sidled toward the money, made me sick. It told more than I could write on pages of paper; and it told a degrading story of avarice and wretchedness.

Thirty-eight years ago, that couple, then probably just married and young, had settled down there; and from that time forward they had made money and raised children—the latter, probably, because they found it more economical than hiring people to work on the farm. I cannot describe to you their remarkable queernesses of look and manner. The old woman was fat, but her face, the color of copper, had none of the jolly or motherly expression of most fat old women. Her restless black eyes shifted constantly to and fro, and she seemed to be under the influence of an unsatisfied demon of motion, for she waddled and trotted without a single moment's cessation. Neither a physiognomist nor a phrenologist would have been pleased with her face and head—or the man's either.

The old man had piercing gray eyes, that fixed upon you firmly, and looked you through, with an intense look. His manner and the still-expression (you know what I mean?) of his features didn't trouble one like the woman's; for one don't notice such things so strikingly in a man. But that expression corresponded perfectly with the facts aforesaid—that not one of their nine children lived home—they had no servants—that they were rich—and that they seized ravenously on my shilling! I almost forgot to say that the wife's mother, a superannuated relic of mortality, aged ninety-two, still lived with them.

I have been somewhat particular in drawing this little "family picture" for you, because, with fewer or greater modifications, it stands good for a sadly large number of Long Island and New England country people, with probably one exception. There are few of the farmers, or farmers' wives about east Long Island who will take shillings for a cup of milk and a slice of bread to the wayfarer. Doubtless the same exception holds good in New England.

You would be amazed, in peregrinating around these quarters, at finding out the number of people who *live alone*. The other day, I turned off the road to call at the hut of a venerable hermitess, that used to remind me of some of the old women in Scott's novels, with her short blanket-cloak, her horn-rimmed spectacles, and her long hickory staff.⁴ I made the acquaintance of the dame of a Sunday, some years since, on which occasion she gave me a specimen of her vocal powers, evidently then in full vigor. A small gift purchased her good will, and our acquaintance has been preserved by annual instalments. Poor, half-deranged, old creature! She lived all alone, in a miserable cottage, some distance from the road—all alone, for many years, though those who were related to her, and who were rich, would have taken her to stay with them, but she would not. Strange and ridiculous, and—but sacred be the poor old crone's weak traits, for she is under the

sod. I found the old cottage unoccupied. The paper blinds were up at the windows, and a wild black cat scampered under the house; and a neighbor told me that the old woman had died some six months ago.

To the north of the village, again, in a small two-roomed dwelling, lives a man by himself—an old fellow, who for years has done his own cooking and washing—and made his own shirts, for what I know. He is a fat, stolid looking old man. Benevolence and philoprogenitiveness have made themselves scarce on his skull-cap.

Truly, I might go on, and jot down a long string of these solitary people, who betake themselves aside from their kind, and seem to resist companionship the more they need it by growing old. Sometimes, in the middle of wide "plains," or on the edge of extensive woods, or otherwheres at a great distance from any neighbor, I find families living, who see no one but their own members for days in succession. They hear no news, till it is old—sometimes not the most startling and important occurrences, till months after they are printed in city papers. And all this within a hundred miles of New York!

From the people themselves I have learned that, generally, at first, it was irksome to them, and they felt solitary enough; but in a very few seasons they liked it better, and by and by it was inexpressibly annoying to be long in a thick town, or surrounded closely by neighbors. They came to *love* their far-removed habitations, and if their children went away, the old people would stick with double tenacity; and if one of the old people died, the other would still remain in the same place, and would not move away!

Such were the ones, who, when newly married, had bought lands very cheap in those remote spots, and gone to make a living there. But there were others, who from childhood had grown up on similar farms by themselves, surrounded by deserts of plain, or pine, or scruboak; and this class too—so individuals of them told me—felt happier in their solitude than they could bring themselves to feel where the dwellings were less sparse.

Does some one suggest that from the scattered nature of a country populations, vice is scarcer? It appears so, but it is not probably so in reality. *In proportion*, there is as much wickedness in country as in towns. What I mean is this: Suffolk county, L.I., has about 40,000 inhabitants, New York city has eight or ten times that number—does any one suppose that any fair average eighth part of the city generates more vice, or contains more, than Suffolk county? And I believe that the county I mention has as sternly honest a race of inhabitants as any in the Republic.

There is also a great amount of error as to the physical advantages of country life. The *air* is wholesomer, of course; but that advantage is generally counterbalanced by evils in other points. The country child is put to hard work at an early age; he soon loses the elasticity of youth, and becomes round-shouldered and clumsy. He learns to smoke, chew, and drink, about as soon as his town prototype. The diet of country people is generally abominable; pork and grease, doughy bread, and other equally indigestible dishes, form a large portion of their food. They work very

much too hard, and put too heavy labors upon the youthful ones. The excessive fatigue of a hurried harvest, in the hottest season of the year, thoroughly breaks the constitution of many a boy and young man.

So much have I informally written because what I *have* written is by no means the popular view, although the truth. Does any one infer that I would advise country-boys to betake themselves to the city right off? God forgive me, if it should tend that way: no! The city hath its perils, too, and very likely the novice would find them great ones. Yet would I have no child reared up on the barbarous ignorance of so many quite well-off country families. And I say that, no matter what moralists and metaphysicians may teach, *out of cities the human race does not expand and improvise so well morally, intellectually, or physically*. Nor do I yield the point when some one goes farther than our own land, to London, or Paris, or manufacturing Glasgow or Manchester.

PAUMANOK.

Notes:

1. Dr. John George Zimmerman (1728-1795), a Swiss physician and author of a four-volume collection of essays entitled *Solitude*. See Johann Georg Zimmermann, *Solitude* (London: Thomas Maiden, 1804), 1:xi-xlviii. [\[back\]](#)

2. Perhaps Whitman is here referring to terms he deems to be indicative of a certain "of-the-times" tendency to regard solitude and isolation as inherently virtuous. Although verbatim passages have not surfaced, variations abound. The second volume of Zimmerman's *Solitude* (see note 1) mentions the "tranquil delights of retirement" (260). A fictional piece from *The Ladies' Repository* describes the "insipid pleasures of obscurity" (E.A.B., "Happiness Sought and Found," *The Ladies' Repository* 25 [1849]: 456. [\[back\]](#)

3. *Children of the Abbey* (1796), written by Irish author Regina Maria Roche (1764-1845), was "one of the most popular female Gothic novels of the late eighteenth century" (Diane Long Hoeveler, "Regina Maria Roche's *The Children of the Abbey*: Contesting the Catholic Presence in Female Gothic Fiction," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 31 [2012], 137-158). *Rinaldo Rinaldini* (1797) is a novel by Christian August Vulpius, a German writer and dramatist. Widely read and translated, it was published as a two-volume book in the United States in 1848, entitled *The History of Rinaldo Rinaldini, Captain of Banditti*. On both sides of the Atlantic, it was generally considered to be pulpy, lurid, and in bad taste. *Alonzo and Melissa* (1804) is another example of popular, Gothic fiction. Originally published in installments in the Poughkeepsie weekly *Political Barometer* by Isaac Mitchell, who was also the editor of the paper, it was plagiarized in 1811 by Daniel Jackson, Jr., and published under his name in book form. It is the latter edition that became widely read. "Masters Fox and Baxter" are John Foxe (1517-1587), Protestant martyrologist, and Richard Baxter (1615-1691), Puritan theologian; both English. [\[back\]](#)

4. Walter Scott (1771-1832), English novelist and playwright. [\[back\]](#)

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